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The Lavon Affair

Israel and Terror in Egypt



**Pinhas
Lavon**

Prologue

The Lavon affair ("Esek Habish" - the shameful affair) was one of the most bizarre chapters in Israeli history. In 1954, the Israeli secret service set up a spy ring in Egypt, with the purpose of blowing up US and British targets. The operation was code-named "Susanah." The terrorist hits were

to be blamed on the regime of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, with the purpose of alienating the US and Britain from Egypt and Nasser and somehow preventing Egyptian nationalization of the Suez canal. The ring was discovered. Strict censorship ensured that the Israeli public officially knew little or nothing of the affair for many years. Names were not mentioned, the affair was called "Esek Bish" - the affair of shame, and key protagonists were referred to as "X" and "the third man." Unofficially and through leaks, most people knew at least the outlines of the affair.

No ingredient was omitted that could make this affair a totally morally repugnant fiasco. The affair occurred during a difficult time in Israel. Terrorist raids on Israel and reprisals had provoked a public debate about the efficacy of reprisals. [David Ben-Gurion](#), the founding Prime Minister, had retired to his kibbutz, Sde Boker, in September 1953 claiming fatigue and age. In October 1954, an Israeli reprisal raid in Qibieh, in the West Bank, lead by Ariel Sharon, had miscarried, resulting in the death of 69 civilians. An acrimonious debate was kindled between "activists" who advocated continuing such raids, and doves, led by PM Sharett, who were against them. It was presumed that the "activists," proteges of Ben Gurion, and in particular [Moshe Dayan](#) who was IDF Chief of Staff, initiated the operation on the orders of Ben Gurion. Ben Gurion, on the other hand, disowned Defense Minister Lavon, and claimed that Lavon had given the orders. The left wing of the Labor party adopted the cause of Lavon. The right adopted the cause of Ben Gurion, [Shimon Peres](#) and [Moshe Dayan](#). Nothing definite could ever be proven.

The prisoners of the Lavon affair remained forgotten in Egyptian jails, and were not exchanged after the Sinai campaign. Since they were mostly Sephardi Jews, their cause became a cause celebre of those who claimed that Israel, and in particular the Mapai party, discriminated against Sephardi Jews.

The arrest of the ring resulted in an affair that dominated Israeli politics for over a decade. Israel was embarrassed, as it had been caught trying to harm American and British interests for no reason and in instigating terror attacks against innocent targets. The spies who were not executed were left to rot in Egyptian jails. Meanwhile, a wave of

persecution forced the emigration of tens of thousands of Jews from Egypt, leaving behind property, memories and roots. Investigations in Israel led to a trail of forged documents and perjured testimony, as everyone involved tried to implicate others. To all of the above would be added the ignominy of betrayal, as it became evident eventually that Israeli agent Avri Seidenberg (Avri Elad) had probably betrayed the operation to the Egyptians.

The spy ring was not run by the Israeli Mossad intelligence service, but rather by unit 131 of AMAN (IDF intelligence). The rationale behind creation of this group was that they would be local sleeper agents, trained in various techniques, who would remain in place and be activated only in case of war. At some point, someone decided, for unknown reasons, to activate the ring without waiting for war.

In those days the intelligence services were comparatively inexperienced, under budgeted and unprofessional, though the Mossad was to achieve notable success, mainly through luck, such as obtaining a copy of the twentieth party congress speech of Soviet Premier Krushchev. Israeli intelligence was easy to infiltrate. They had a relatively low opinion of intelligence services of Arab countries and were therefore not on their guard. Their vetting procedures for new agents were poor. Soviet and other intelligence agencies also had no little trouble recruiting agents among new immigrants.

The Egyptian spies were poorly compartmentalized. They were not trained to resist torture. The operation was not compartmentalized: the spies knew each other's identities. Thus, there was a danger that under interrogation, any one of them could betray the entire group. Worse, it is now believed that in fact they were betrayed by the Israeli agent in charge of the operation. The sensational revelations about the spy ring endangered the entire Egyptian Jewish community, which numbered about 50,000, as well as the credibility of Israel.

The Ring

The Egyptian Jews known to have been recruited for the spy ring were:

Shmuel Azar

Yosef Carmon
Victor Levy
Dr. Moshe Marzouk
Meir Meyuhas
Robert Dassa
Phillip Nathanson
Marcelle Ninio
Meir Za'afra

There may have been others, including an additional Israeli agent. They were recruited and trained by Avraham Dar, an Israeli agent who went by the name of John Darling, supposedly a British businessman. They were flown to France and then to Israel and trained in use of explosives.

Dar's ring was handed over to Avraham Seidenberg, who had Hebraicized his name to Avri Elad. Elad had a shady past. He had gotten in trouble with the IDF in 1948 for looting a refrigerator from an Arab house, and had been reduced in rank to private. Shimon Peres claims that Elad was a crook even as a young member of Kibbutz Alumot. Peres was then treasurer of the Kibbutz, and he relates that Elad pilfered the contents of Peres's wallet, which had cash to be used for Kibbutz purchases (Peres, p 104). Elad was nonetheless recruited into the intelligence service owing to lax vetting procedures. He first traveled to Germany, where he posed as a former SS officer named Paul Frank. He apparently managed to discover how wanted Nazi war criminals were able to escape to Arab countries, as well as getting information about Egyptian efforts to recruit former Nazis to help it build an arms industry. However, Israeli intelligence later assessed that at some point Elad became a double agent.

The Ring Acts and is Caught

The group was activated in July of 1954. The first bombs were placed in post offices on July 15, followed by the USIA libraries in Cairo and Alexandria on July 14. On July 23, more bombs were exploded in two Cairo cinemas, in the railway terminal and central post office. The entire ring was soon rounded up, either because of information divulged under interrogation or because it had been betrayed. Ostensibly, they were caught when, by chance, incendiary bombs went off in the pocket of Phillip Nathanson while he was waiting in line outside the British owned Rio theater in Alexandria on July 23 (according to

Melman and Haber). However, police who arrested Nathanson said they had been tipped off according to some versions.

Max (Meir) Binett (or Benett), another member of unit 131, IDF intelligence, was in Egypt on other business. He had previously been an agent in Tehran and Baghdad. In 1952 he was sent to Egypt as a German businessman. Unfortunately, Marcelle Ninio knew at least the license plate number of his automobile, though probably not his name, and either she, or Elad had given him away to the Egyptians.

As soon as the group was arrested, Moshe Dayan, then Chief of Staff of the IDF, fired Mordechai Ben Tzur, who had headed unit 131, replacing him with Major Yossi Harel (Hamburger) who was recalled from studies in the United States. Harel may be familiar to readers in another role - he was the commander of the immigrant ship, Exodus, in 1947. Harel ordered the withdrawal of all unit 131 agents operating in Arab countries from the field, until it could be ascertained that nobody was compromised by the arrests. They were only returned in 1956.

The Trial and Sentencing

The Egyptians had announced the arrest of a "13 man spy ring" on October 5, 1954 (Hirst, 1977). The trial in Egypt began on December 11. The Egyptians apparently somehow concluded that the operation was ordered by the Israeli Secretary of Defense, Pinchas Lavon, though they could not possibly have had evidence from the prisoners that proved this claim. It was nonetheless a reasonable assumption. Of the thirteen defendants, two were acquitted. Max Binnet could not risk revealing his identity as an Israeli agent and committed suicide on arrest. Yosef Carmon committed suicide in prison. . Dr. Moshe Marzouk of Cairo and Shmuel Azar of Alexandria, were sentenced to death and hanged in a Cairo prison. Marzouk claimed that he had organized the ring and took full responsibility, apparently to reduce the guilt of the others. Victor Levy and Philip Nathanson, got life sentences. .Marcelle Ninio, a woman, and Robert Dassa, were both sentenced to 15 years in jail. Meir Meyuhas and Meir Za'afra, served seven year jail sentences, were released in 1962 and made their way to Israel, where they lived in obscurity. Israel did not even try to exchange any of the prisoners for Egyptian prisoners of war after the 1956 Suez campaign. In

1968 however, following the 6 day war, they were finally released, on the insistence of Meir Amit, then head of AMAN.

Shakeups in Israel

The Israeli cabinet had not seen fit to discuss the incident at all until the trial concluded in Egypt. The Israeli press was outraged by the allegations of the Egyptians, and alleged that it was a frame up. Perhaps the truth was not brought to the attention of the cabinet immediately. The details of the affair had remained top secret for many years. However, a version of the affair had been leaked by the army to poet Nathan Alterman, who published a poem that hinted about it esoterically in his column in Davar, the Mapai party newspaper. When the government reviewed the case after the trial, both Pinchas Lavon, who had been minister of defense, and Benjamin Gibli, who headed AMAN, resigned or were forced out. Lavon's resignation was also influenced by his tendency to order retaliatory attacks without the approval of PM [Moshe Sharett](#). Lavon was replaced by Ben Gurion, who returned from retirement in Sde Boker, and Gibli was replaced by Yehoshafat Harkavi, his deputy. Before his resignation, Gibli sent Elad back to Germany, perhaps to keep him from testifying.

An investigation led astray

A committee of two, composed of Yitzhak Olshan, president of the Supreme court, and Yaakov Dori, first IDF chief of staff, was appointed to investigate the affair. They were unable to answer the question, "who gave the order" because people involved lied systematically and forged documents.

Isser Harel, head of the Mossad and the *Sherut Bitachon Klali* (Shin Bet - the General Security Services, responsible for internal security) in the 1950s, had been suspicious of Elad, because he had gotten out of the affair unscathed. The evidence was suggestive. However, Harel had no proof and he had no real influence in AMAN, which was part of the IDF, or in unit 131. Without proof, he could do little.

In January 1955, Elad was ordered back to Israel to testify. Givli tried to travel to Germany and suborn Elad, but the plan was discovered by Dayan, who blocked the trip. Givli managed to send a message by special courier. He also met

Elad at the airport and "guided" his testimony. Elad perjured himself and supported Givli's version, giving a date for the order supposedly issued by Ben Tzur that corresponded with the date given in a letter that had been forged on Givli's orders. In a book he wrote long after the event, Elad admitted he had lied on the orders of his superiors, claiming that he did it in order to save the image of the IDF. Elad's perjured testimony was probably crucial in preventing the Olshan-Dori committee from discovering who had given the order for the operation. The committee reported on January 13, 1955:

"We were not convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the head of military intelligence [Givli] did not receive the order from the Minister of Defense [Lavon]. At the same time, we are not sure that the Minister of Defense did give the order attributed to him." (Peres, pp 103-104).

Elad was apparently no longer working for military intelligence. However, returned to Germany, ostensibly to care for his father, who was very ill. At the beginning of 1956, he was ordered back to Israel and questioned again by Yossi Harel, but to no avail. Elad again returned to Germany. Apparently without getting permission from his former superiors in AMAN, Elad contacted Colonel Othman Nuri, who was deputy-commander of Egyptian intelligence.

Mole!

In 1957, David Kimche, then a junior Mossad agent, tried to recruit a former Wehrmacht intelligence officer, Robert Jensen. Kimche claimed he was working for a "European intelligence service." Jensen told Kimche that he knew that he must come from Nuri. An Egyptian agent had told him to tell Nuri that "Wagner sent him." The name of this "Egyptian agent" according to Jensen, was Paul Frank. Kimche was aghast. Paul Frank was Elad's cover name.

This information reached David Ben-Gurion, now Prime Minister again, the next day. He ordered IDF field security to investigate. Elad was an Israeli hero and had to be treated with kid gloves. Versions differ on how Elad was enticed to come back to Israel. He was offered various business deals according to Ya'akov Hefetz, who had been put in charge of the investigation. Elad claimed in his book that he returned of his own free will to

find out the truth in the Lavon affair. In any event, he was invited for interrogation by IDF field security, in the company of Unit 131 commander, Yossi Harel.

Yaakov Hefetz, head of IDF field security, interrogated Elad. Microphones broadcast the interrogation to an adjacent room, where Tzvi Aharoni and Victor Cohen, Shin Bet agents, were listening in. Aharoni had been given a special appointment as a senior police officer for this mission.

Hefetz, who knew Elad well as a comrade in arms, began by saying, "Avri, I am not speaking to you now as Yankele Hefetz, your friend, but as the head of the IDF Field Security department talking to Captain Avri Seidenberg.

Elad cut him off and said, using Yiddish slang mixed with Hebrew, "Never mind the hush hush stuff and get to the point."

Hefetz said, "You do not have to respond, but what you say may be held in evidence against you. Avri, have you ever betrayed your country?"

Elad paled, according to Hefetz, and said, most amazingly, "Wait, Wait, let me think about that and remember."

This was enough for Tzvi Aharoni, who cut the interview short, entered the room and said, "I am arresting you on the grounds of suspicions I hold against you."

Elad was interrogated at length, but denied everything. Victor Cohen, who had known virtually nothing about "operation Sussanah" was amazed, and was also skeptical of Elad's version of the story. Elad had stayed in Egypt for 12 days after the arrest of the ring. He had sold his De Soto automobile. He even took the trouble to remove the bumper to reduce its tax value. He claimed that he had smuggled out of Egypt film of rockets being developed with the aid of German technicians. All this was incredible. Nonetheless, Elad was still treated with kid gloves. According to Melman and Haber, on the way to his incarceration in Ramle prison, he persuaded his guards to allow him to stop in his apartment. He arranged for a friend, Peter Landesman, to pick up a suitcase from his apartment, and to stop a shipment of personal effects on its way to Hamburg. Landesman put the freight in storage in a locker in Haifa. When he

opened the suitcase, he found it was full of top-secret documents and burned them.

However, Elad gave his sister, who visited him in jail, a note for Landesman. The note was intercepted by the Shin Bet, and Landesman was interrogated and confessed to burning the documents. The freight originally destined for Hamburg contained Elad's diary, but there was nothing in it to incriminate him in betrayal of the Israeli spy ring in Egypt. Additional documents, held by his wife in Germany, disappeared.

Elad was tried in 1958 and sentenced to ten years in prison for relatively minor offences. The judges noted the strong suspicion that he had betrayed the spy ring, but his role could not be proven.

Aftershocks - Reinvestigation

Failure has no fathers. It was time to pass the buck. Ben Gurion insisted that Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon was responsible for the fiasco. Lavon insisted that Colonel Benjamin Givli, a protege of Ben Gurion and head of Aman (Military intelligence) had organized the operation behind his back. Lavon insisted on re-opening the affair. Ben Gurion appointed a committee of three members, Supreme Court Justice Haim Cohen and two army officers. However, Lavon also testified to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee. He blamed Givli and accused Givli and others of an elaborate frame-up and cover up. The testimony was leaked, causing a scandal.

Lavon claimed Ben-Gurion was persecuting him, and insisted on that his name be cleared. The cabinet backed Lavon. A commission of inquiry consisting of 7 ministers was set up to investigate. They found that Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres forged a document, apparently the letter giving the order, to incriminate Lavon. On December 24, 1960, the Israeli cabinet unanimously exonerated Lavon of all guilt in the 'disastrous security adventure in Egypt'. According to a New York Times article (New York Times, 10 February 1961) the Attorney General had found 'conclusive evidence of forgeries as well as false testimony in an earlier inquiry'. This was most likely the testimony of Elad and Givli, and the forged letter that Givli had produced.

Ben-Gurion insisted that the committee was politically motivated, and that ministers could not

be judges. In the subsequent 1961 elections, Ben-Gurion declared that he would only accept office if Lavon was fired as First Secretary of the Histadrut, Israel's labor union organization. His demands were met. Lavon was forced to resign, but his supporters organized protest demonstrations. However, in 1964 Ben Gurion claimed there was new evidence and demanded that the government reopen the investigation with a proper judicial commission. According to Shimon Peres, Ben Gurion felt that Lavon had at least ministerial overall responsibility, and that it was unjust for him to place all the blame on Givli, an army officer. However, in the absence of proof, Ben Gurion was content with the ambiguous ruling of Olshan and Drori. When Lavon insisted on exoneration however, Ben-Gurion insisted on some sort of judicial commission. At this time, there was no law regarding judicial investigations in Israel. The procedure for such investigations was established by law only in 1968, as a result of the Lavon Affair. (Peres, pp 110-111).

Ben Gurion tried to force his political party Mapai, The Israel Workers Party, to resolve this issue during 1964-1965. Instead, Ben-Gurion was forced to leave the party he had founded. The party cleared and rehabilitated Lavon completely in May 1964. Ben-Gurion founded the *Min Hayesod* faction with Shimon Peres and Moshe Dayan. This later became the Rafi party which won ten mandates, but then was reduced to four members as the Reshima Mamlachtit party after Dayan and Peres returned to the Labor party in 1967. Ben-Gurion failed to attract a significant number of votes, and retained a permanent enmity to Levy Eshkol, who had replaced him as Prime Minister. In 1967, in part because of this enmity, Ben Gurion and his supporters were able to bring about the enlargement of the Eshkol government just before the 6-Day War.

History had passed by the founder of the Israeli state because of this one affair. Ben-Gurion retired to his home in Sde Boker in the Negev, to live in relative obscurity, and influence events from the side lines through his proteges - Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres, until they returned to the Labor party.

In the 1980s, Benjamin Givli's secretary, Dalia Goldstein, confessed to forging the letter giving the orders, supposedly sent by Ben Tzur, that had been used to incriminate Lavon. The forged letter to

Elad activating the ring, was given an incorrect date. As noted, Givli had also suborned Elad to give false testimony. By that time, Ben Gurion was dead. The Labor party, partly owing to the scandal set in motion by the Lavon affair, was out of power. Elad had moved to California and written his memoirs, protesting his innocence.

Epilogue

To this day the truth about who gave the orders in the Lavon affair cannot be ascertained. We do not have all the pieces of the puzzle. Probably we never will. In the absence of real information, the Lavon affair has been fertile grounds for speculation by various interested parties, but none of the theories offered fits all the facts. For many years, Israeli leftist parties sided with Lavon against Ben-Gurion, Dayan and Peres. Peres continues to maintain his innocence, and claims that Lavon had become eccentric and held extremist anti-American and anti-western views. Rumor claims that Lavon was an alcoholic. The affair continues to do damage to this day, because every bigot, crank and eccentric can use it to prove their favorite contention. Most recently, it has been used to "prove" that Israel engineered the Al-Qaida terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Qui Bono?

Curiously, the alleged motivation for the operation has not been questioned. Who could really have benefited had it been successful?

Shabtai Tevet, Ben Gurion's biographer, stated that the assignment was "To undermine Western confidence in the existing [Egyptian] regime by generating public insecurity and actions to bring about arrests, demonstrations, and acts of revenge, while totally concealing the Israeli factor. The team was accordingly urged to avoid detection, so that suspicion would fall on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communists, 'unspecified malcontents' or 'local nationalists'." (Tevet, p. 81).

"The team was.. urged to avoid detection" is an absurd statement. Did Tevet mean to imply that otherwise, Israeli espionage teams *are* not urged to avoid detection? Of course it is a good idea to avoid detection if you are Israeli agents blowing up public and foreign facilities in an Arab country.

The team would hardly need urging on that score. But if secrecy was of the essence, why wasn't the operation compartmentalized? Why weren't team members taught to resist torture? These techniques were certainly known to the Israeli intelligence establishment, and had been used in the preparation of paratroopers sent behind Nazi lines in WW II.

On examination, the motives offered are far-fetched. The ostensible purpose was to prevent the withdrawal of British occupying forces from Suez, which would supposedly leave Israeli defenses naked to Egyptian attack. Firstly, the British were in no position to stop an Egyptian attack with their small occupation force. Secondly, if, as often claimed, the affair was the work of the Israeli activist faction, it made no sense. The activists wanted decisive action against Egypt. This was not possible as long as the British were in Suez, in close proximity to Sinai and defending the canal. With the British gone, and no longer committed to defense of Egypt and the canal, the way became open to contemplate a large scale military operation such as the Sinai campaign.

The possible gains from the bombings carried out by this group would in any case have been minor. There is no reason to assume the US would necessarily have blamed the Egyptian government for activities of opposition as some claim (See for example, Hirst, 1977). On the contrary, Nasser could claim he was carrying out a pro-Western policy against the wishes of the opposition, and that removal of British troops was needed to satisfy anti-Western sentiment. The British pullout was not dependent on the stability of the Egyptian regime. Egypt had just undergone a revolution that was not quite completed, and was known to be unstable anyway. It is a fact that several of the bombs were in fact set off, but American and British policy were totally unaffected. In all, it is extremely doubtful if the operation would have accomplished anything even if the ring had not been caught. Even had they been convinced that Nasser's regime was unstable, the US and Britain tend to prop up their unstable allies, not abandon them. That could have been easily foreseen. Why then, would Israel risk the safety of Egyptian Jews, its relations with the US and Britain and its agents? The argument that Lavon was a scapegoat of "activists" who wanted him out of the way so that they could perform more reprisal raids doesn't make sense either, because Lavon was apparently an extreme hawk.

If Givli acted on the orders of Dayan in forging the letter, then why did Dayan try to stop him from coordinating testimony with Elad, as Melman and Haber claim? If Givli acted on his own, or if in reality Lavon had given the order, what were their motivations? Is it possible that Givli was somehow involved with Elad's activities as a double agent, that Elad was indeed trying to raise money for his sick father, but selling real secrets instead of fake ones as he claimed? Givli might have been sharing profits with Elad, and may have seen the need to cover his tracks. A foreign power who knew about the ring may have induced Elad or Givli to activate it in order to embarrass Israel or to cause an Egyptian rift with the west, or to provide Egypt for an excuse for stepping up infiltration against Israel. All of these were in fact direct or indirect consequences of the fiasco, and they could have been easily foreseen, especially since whoever instigated it knew about the ring. Given the contempt of Israeli intelligence for Arab intelligence services, and their false sense of security regarding foreign penetration in general, it is doubtful that this possibility was ever investigated. Given the number of espionage fiascos due to penetration by foreign agents in those years, it is a possibility that should have been investigated.

Ami Isseroff

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